

# Military Retention Intangibles:

# Esprit, Morale and Cohesion

Congressman Ike Skelton

*As the US Army approaches its 225th birthday in the year 2000, it is of critical importance that all service members do their utmost to stem the tide of experienced noncommissioned officers and junior officers leaving the service. As the author maintained before the House Armed Services Committee: "Congress can help with military retention via pay and recognition, but only the military can build and maintain Esprit—that indescribable something—that makes them want to stay."*

**T**HE SHIFT IN THE 1970s from a conscript military to an All-Volunteer Force helped build one of history's most dominant militaries. Yet, despite battlefield successes with minimal casualties in the 1990s, the US military is losing a battle of attrition. The military can no longer retain the number of experienced noncommissioned officers and junior officers it needs to maintain required end strength.<sup>1</sup>

Many leave the military to take higher-paying jobs in the private sector. Industry seeks talent and is willing to pay for it during strong economic periods, and talent abounds among the military's "best and brightest." Military members constitute a loyal, self-disciplined work force, superbly trained and educated to run a high-tech military that is the envy of the world. The military must compete with industry to retain those it needs, yet it does not have the power to negotiate salaries in the same fashion as the private sector.

In this year that I have labeled the "Year of the Troops," Congress will do its part to help keep mili-

tary pay and benefits competitive. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000 authorizes a 4.8 percent pay raise across the board, with selected midgrade raises as high as a 9.9 percent. This is the single highest pay raise since the 1979-1981 period, when Congress was grappling with the ghastly manpower problems of the "hollow force." Congressional action to reform retirement pay should also help with retention.<sup>2</sup>

It's not just about money, however. A more oft-cited factor for leaving the military is that—after winning the Cold War and downsizing—our military finds itself busier than ever, protecting American interests around the world. This translates to longer and more frequent periods away from home for those fewer personnel remaining. Simply put, a higher operations tempo is wearing out the troops, and in the aggregate, they are giving notice with their feet.

In spite of this, retention and morale have been highest in deployed units. I have had the opportunity to talk with troops in the field, most recently in



Bosnia, and their morale was sky-high. Their retention numbers were equally as impressive. Why? They weren't getting paid much more, and they were separated from their families. Yet, by and large, they were happy and they were re-enlisting. Maybe the extra pay, such as hazardous duty pay and family separation allowance, made a difference. Maybe it's because they were doing what they signed up to do, making the world a better, safer place. Maybe. But, judging by the gleam I saw in their eyes and the pride they displayed, I say that *Esprit* was the difference.

As I stated in the 24 February 1999, House Armed Services Committee hearing with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Congress can help with military retention via pay and recognition, but only the military can build and maintain *esprit*—that indescribable something—that makes them want to stay. I'm not just talking about leadership by the service chiefs; I'm talking about deckplate leadership—leadership in the field and on the runway—at all levels of command, from junior enlisted to senior officer.

### **Esprit, Morale and Cohesion Defined**

In my statement to the Joint Chiefs, I talked only about *esprit*. In addition to *esprit*, morale and cohesion may also be important to retention, while most certainly being key to combat effectiveness.

Most military personnel know *esprit* as unit pride, that common spirit of enthusiasm, devotion and collective honor. A shared sense of unit accomplishment can strengthen *esprit*, particularly, when overcoming adversity. This shared success binds individuals not only to their unit but also to each other.

*Morale* is the mental and emotional condition of an individual or group in terms of enthusiasm, confidence and loyalty. *Morale* is a subjective end state directly attributable to leadership and its manifestations, such as a leader's genuine concern for the welfare of the troops. Among *esprit*, morale and cohesion, morale is the most volatile, turning on things both seemingly small and historically significant, such as mail, chow, hard work, victory. Whereas *esprit* and cohesion are the principal province of military leadership, forces outside the military can affect morale. For instance, Congress influences morale through pay, benefits and other environmental factors.

While soldiers may draw real strength from unit pride and collective attitudes, their ability to endure, persevere and remain determined in the face of mounting combat stress is primarily a function of *Cohesion*.<sup>3</sup> When morale and *esprit* combine with cohesion, the military payoff occurs. Unit pride and

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the urge to protect comrades help reduce psychological and physiological fear. Trusting comrades to do their job and cover one's backside—and working so as never to let them down—allow training to kick in. Together military members are able to accomplish the task at hand, despite life-threatening individual fears. Stated simply, *esprit*, morale and cohesion lead to greater combat effectiveness.

### **Esprit, Morale and Cohesion in Combat**

An example of decisive *esprit*, morale and cohesion in combat can be found in the famous American Revolution naval battle between the USS *Bonhomme Richard* and the British frigate HMS *Serapis*.

On 23 September 1779, off Flamborough Head, England, and an hour into the sea battle, the British commander hailed Captain John Paul Jones and asked if the *Bonhomme Richard* was ready to surrender. An experienced seaman's eye could clearly make out a mortally wounded ship, punished beyond normal physical endurance, ready to strike its colors.

From his blood-laden decks and with a portion of his ship literally blown out from under him, Jones shouted his immortal response, "I have not yet begun to fight!" This fierce determination infused Jones' officers and crew with renewed spirit and vigor. Fueled by fighting *elan*, confidence in their leader and trust in one another, the American sailors fought ferociously, ultimately seizing victory from the jaws of defeat. The *Bonhomme Richard* would later sink, but not before Jones had lashed his ship to his defeated enemy's and claimed it as his own.

Jones tapped into something that night that had been created long before. In the months prior to that battle, Jones, his officers and crew had sailed many

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miles at sea and conducted long hours of training together. Through good leadership and attention to esprit, morale and cohesion, Jones had forged the *Bonhomme Richard* and the men under his command into a combat-effective unit much greater than the sum of a converted French merchant ship and an otherwise-ordinary crew. At the critical moment, the reservoir of esprit, morale and cohesion turned the tide of the battle.

Another example of powerful esprit, morale and cohesion resounds in one of the most dramatic battles in military history—the Battle of “the Frozen Chosin” during the Korean War. In mid-November 1950 the First Marine Division was tasked to take the Chosin Reservoir, an important hydroelectric plant. The cool autumn temperatures had just given way to bitterly cold weather when advanced Marine elements reached Hagaru-ri at the southern tip of the reservoir and made contact with Chinese forces.

Eight Chinese divisions surrounded the First Marine Division, intent on destroying it. Many senior military leaders and the press immediately gave the First Marine Division up for lost. Most would have lost heart in such a desperate situation but Colonel Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller, the only Marine to win the Navy Cross five times for heroism and gallantry in combat, doggedly pointed out:

“We’ve been looking for the enemy for several days now. We’ve finally found them. We’re surrounded. That simplifies our problem of getting to these people and killing them.”

Despite being outnumbered 60,000 to 12,000, the Marines never lost their spirit. They ferociously fought the Chinese, finishing with a 78-mile fighting withdrawal to an amphibious evacuation at the port of Hungnam, Korea. There all casualties were evacuated, and all salvageable equipment was brought out. The Marines suffered 4,000 casual-

ties while inflicting nearly 25,000 on Chinese forces.

Major General Oliver Smith, commander of the First Marine Division, drew on esprit, morale and cohesion, saving the First Marine Division for its next fight. Where others saw the Marine withdrawal as a retreat, Smith explained it in typical Marine spirit, “Retreat Hell! We’re just attacking in another direction.” First Marine Division esprit, morale and cohesion were critical as to the division’s fighting spirit in the face of overwhelming odds. The Marines had faith in one another and in their outstanding leaders such as Smith and Puller.

A more recent example of the contribution of esprit, morale and cohesion to combat effectiveness was displayed by the 75th Ranger Regiment in Somalia on 3 October 1993. Part of the Ranger creed states, “I will never surrender. I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy and under no circumstances will I ever embarrass my country.”

One hundred and forty-two Rangers of the 3d Battalion had just captured 22 supporters of Mohammed Farrah Aideed when a supporting Black Hawk helicopter was shot down by Somali rocket-propelled grenades. A Ranger platoon leader saw the helicopter crash and immediately led 13 men from his platoon on foot four blocks to the crash site. The streets of Mogadishu erupted in a hail of small-arms fire and grenades. In the streets, automatic fire from behind walls, rooftops and windows showered the rescue patrol. Five of the six Rangers killed in the fire-fight died en route to the helicopter, and three of the Somali captives in one Ranger truck were killed. The fire was so intense that the Ranger commander ordered the rescue convoy to retreat back to the airport.

At the crash site, the Ranger platoon was augmented by 15 more Rangers from a search and rescue helicopter that had to limp back to base after being hit. Still under unrelenting fire, the 29 remaining Rangers hunkered down and went to recover the fallen pilot and co-pilot. They remained engaged the entire time, fighting for 6 straight hours until a relief force arrived.

Eighteen Americans died in the fire-fight, with another 77 wounded. Somali casualties included at least 300 killed and 700 wounded. The Rangers stayed true to their creed that fateful day—they did not surrender when outnumbered. They did not embarrass America—they made it proud. They protected their comrades’ lives at the risk of their own, in some cases at the cost of their own. The Rangers’ actions personified esprit, morale and cohesion.

An M-60 machinegunner aims his weapon at an arms cantonment area held by forces loyal to warlord Mohammed Farrah Aideed in Mogadishu, Somalia.



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### **Leadership Factors That Affect Esprit, Morale and Cohesion**

Through esprit, morale, and cohesion, a leader builds a combat-ready team of professionals who take pride in their work and in their unit and care about one another like a family. The factors that a leader orchestrates to build esprit, morale and cohesion are well known: "Lead from the front," "be firm but fair," "lead by example" and "take care of your people." Such leadership actions directly shape morale, esprit and cohesion.

Factors that affect esprit relate members to their unit and institution. Unit accomplishments, particularly in the face of adversity, build esprit when members feel their contribution was valuable. Because "success has a thousand fathers, but failure is an orphan," leaders acknowledge subordinates' contributions to mission success and shoulder the blame when things go awry. Appropriate awards and recognition cost little but go a long way in building unit and institutional affiliation.

While unit accomplishments provide identifiable events for which members can be proud, a more important esprit factor is the institutional value sys-

tem. Values make members feel good about belonging to the unit—that it is worth being proud of. Values such as the Navy and Marine Corps' *Honor, Courage, Commitment*, and the Army's *Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, Personal Courage*—LDRSHIP—reflect institutional expectations both of what the member can expect from the institution and vice versa. The cornerstone value is trust, for without it there can be no confidence between the member and the group. Moreover, trust is a prerequisite for retention. Individuals will not stay in an institution they do not trust. Leaders must dedicate themselves to maintaining the integrity of trust within a unit. It takes only one faithless act to destroy trust and monumental effort to reinstall it.

Morale is affected by a host of environmental factors, not all controllable by a leader. Controllable factors include support services such as pay, food, rest and shelter. Congress has an impact on morale through many of the support service factors since money for support services must ultimately be authorized and appropriated. Nonetheless, it is the deckplate leader who ensures pay problems are

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fixed expeditiously, quality meals are served on time, subordinates get enough rest and appropriate shelter is provided. Resources to complete a mission, such as fuel for adequate training and spare parts and tools to fix and maintain equipment, are also important to morale. Other environmental factors that affect morale outside the control of the military leader are weather, the stress of combat and casualty rates. To maintain morale as high as appropriately possible for the situation, a good leader keeps tabs on all environmental factors, controlling them as much as possible or mitigating the effects otherwise.

Cohesion during combat reduces fear. Responsibility to the group subordinates one's own fears to the welfare of all. The factors important to cohesion are mutual social recognition and attachment.<sup>4</sup> Units achieve social recognition and attachment over time through realistic training and team building. Unit members gain confidence in their own ability to act in the face of danger and gain trust in their comrades' ability to do the same. Repetitive, progressive training and performance in combat cement strong bonds among unit members, so that comrades will risk their own lives for one another. Not only must leaders facilitate the forging of these bonds between members, they must also gain their members' trust and confidence in their own competence and leadership. Building cohesion normally takes time, mentoring and a personnel rotation policy that maintains stable units with little turnover.

### **Institutionalizing Esprit, Morale and Cohesion**

Although the powers of esprit, morale and cohesion are well known in the military for their historic contributions during combat, in the modern era only esprit and morale have been consistently institutionalized during peacetime. Factors that build cohesion for combat often conflict with efficient peacetime administration. Speedy and efficient replacements and individually managed career patterns have become the peacetime priorities.<sup>5</sup>

In 1980, Army Chief of Staff General Edward C. Meyer instituted the New Manning System (NMS),

designed specifically to bolster cohesion in Army units. The NMS consisted of two structural components: the unit replacement system and the regimental system. The unit replacement system stabilized personnel in units, with nominal tour lengths of three years, to prevent a constant turnover within a unit. Additionally, instead of replacing individuals piecemeal within units, units were rotated together. The regimental system permanently affiliated personnel with regiments they would serve in throughout their careers and provided home bases where the regimental history, traditions and mementos would reside.

The regimental system wasn't really new. It was actually a throwback to the days when regiments were area-based. Regiments recruited soldiers from the same locale, so they already knew each other and each other's families and lived together in local barracks when in garrison—built-in cohesion. I once had a conversation with a Scottish brigadier about the famous Scottish Black Watch Regiment. I knew of its 200-year heritage and considerable combat reputation. I asked him how they were able to fight so fiercely in battle after battle, often in the face of insurmountable odds. What was it that made them leave the safety of their shell holes and advance against unrelenting, lethal fires? He explained that it was their shared home roots. Shoulder-to-shoulder with their friends and neighbors from home, no one wanted to disgrace himself or his family in combat. The cohesive effects of area affiliation produced endemic courage and valor.

The US Army's NMS was implemented through Project COHORT (Cohesion, Operational Readiness and Training) in March 1981 with the activation of COHORT companies, and later, COHORT battalions. They were a great success according to those who served in them. General John Keane, current US Army vice chief of staff, served in a variety of COHORT units at various levels of command. According to Keane, good leaders developed into outstanding leaders, largely by association with COHORT units. Units achieved individual goals more quickly, and to a much greater degree, than normal units. Standards of military bearing and courtesy were higher and disciplinary problems were fewer. The only drawback was that, while good leadership was amplified, so were the effects of bad leadership. The Army has since abandoned the NMS, reverting to an individual replacement system.

The Marine Corps, a service long noted for its esprit, has embarked on a program to institutionalize cohesion. The Marine Corps approach consists of four phases. It begins with recruiters, who carefully screen applicants, accepting only those with

solid character and those “empty vessels” the Corps can mold into Marines. The second phase takes place at basic training, which culminates in a teamwork exercise known as “the Crucible” that earns a recruit the right to wear the eagle, globe and anchor. In the third phase, cohesion is strengthened through the further bonding of teams formed at the Corps’ skill-producing schools and kept together through their first enlistment. The teams train together, garrison together, deploy together and may be ultimately called upon to fight together. The final phase consists of sustainment. Marine leaders conduct business and accomplish missions in ways that support and reinforce both core values and team building.<sup>6</sup>

The Navy’s system of deploying ships and air squadrons at sea for six months, coupled with the unpredictability of naval surge deployments, probably precludes implementation of an NMS-type system for the sea service.<sup>7</sup> However, in 2000, the Navy plans to experiment with a one-year rotation lock-in period to maximize combat readiness. Sailors assigned to the George Washington Battle Group will remain with their ships or squadrons for the one-year period extending from six months prior to deployment through the battle group’s return to home port.<sup>8</sup>

### Esprit, Morale, Cohesion and Retention

There is little doubt that improved esprit and morale have a positive effect on retention. I have seen the effects of both in the eyes of troops on the front lines and witnessed the retention figures. Logically, cohesion should also have the same effect—building service members into a cohesive family should make them want to stay. Nonetheless, research in this area may be warranted as there is little scientific evidence of a correlation between cohesion and retention. Even granted that a causal relationship between them can be established, the institutionalized means of achieving cohesion may act to harm rather than help retention. For example, the Navy’s lock-in strategy may act to increase combat effectiveness during deployments, but sailors unhappy with not being able to rotate at the Projected Rotation Date or End of Active Obligated Service may opt to leave the service.

*All the pay and benefits in the world won’t stem the tide of experienced noncommissioned officers and junior officers leaving the service if they are poorly led and not taken care of. We cannot tolerate an indifference toward retention. The post-Cold War downsizing is over. We must work doubly hard to retain the “best and brightest” in the military—not just because it makes good economic sense, but because they make more combat-effective units.*

However, if it is done right, I have every confidence that troops in cohesive units, infused with esprit and good morale and led by caring leaders, will want to stay in the military. All the pay and benefits in the world won’t stem the tide of experienced noncommissioned officers and junior officers leaving the service if they are poorly led and not taken care of.

### The Leadership Challenge

We cannot tolerate an indifference toward retention. The post-Cold War downsizing is over. We must work doubly hard to retain the “best and brightest” in the military—not just because it makes good economic sense, but because they make more combat-effective units.

As Congress and the services join to build esprit, morale and cohesion, together we will restore gleam in the eyes of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. They will want to stay. In the short term, a few more quality service members will provide continuity, cohesion and esprit. In the long run, we will have an even more dominant military. And whenever duty calls, the intangible strengths of our warriors and units may prove decisive in combat. Regardless of your service perspective, this is the military its members deserve and upon which our nation depends. **MR**

### NOTES

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1. Officers at the O-3 and O-4 level.

2. The pay raises for 1979-1981 were 9.9, 14.3 and 11.2 percent, respectively.

3. Richard D. Hooker Jr., “Building Unbreakable Units,” *Military Review*, July-August 1985, 25-35.

4. Ibid.

5. Robert L. Goldich, “The U.S. Army’s New Manning System,” Congressional Research Service, 28 June 1983, CRS-xi.

6. General Charles C. Krulak, “Transformation and Cohesion,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, November 1996, 21-23.

7. Goldich, CRS-xvii.

8. John Burlage, “Plan Would Lock In Sailors to Deployment,” *Navy Times*, 21 June 1999.

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